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ABSTRACT

The Pre-College Summer Institute (PCSI) program has been in effect at the University of Hartford, College of Basic Studies, since the summer of 1968. PCSI was a five-week, five-days-a-week program designed to evaluate and prepare marginally acceptable students for the college's entering freshman class. Initially, the program was designed to include only three non-credit bearing courses--English, math, and reading/study skills. In 1976, the program was changed with the addition of a Western Civilization course. During the summers of 1986 and 1987, college credit was given for successful completion of the Reading/Study Skills course. Students selected for the PCSI program have SAT scores within specific ranges and have particular problems with motivation, focusing on goals, attendance, time management, and commitment to task. In the summer of 1990, a small percentage of minority students were added to the predominantly upper middle class student population. There is a need for programs such as PCSI to provide underprepared students with the means to achieve the most from their college experiences. The classes consist of 10 students per section and meet daily for 1 hour 15 minutes for 5 weeks. Diverse instructional approaches were used including lectures, textbook readings, small group assignments, lab applications, journals, site visits, projects, and exams. Problems include lack of available statistics and information about the preceding classes, little follow-up after students leave the program, and scheduling of classes. PCSI is undergoing some radical changes in admissions, scheduling, and course offering. (RS)

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COLLEGE LEARNING STRATEGIES: A RETENTION MODEL FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

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COLLEGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

NOVEMBER, 1990

HISTORY:

The Pre-College Summer Institute (PCSI) program has been in effect, and at University of Hartford, the College of Basic Studies, since the summer of 1968. PCSI was a five week, five days a week program designed to evaluate and prepare marginally acceptable students for the college's entering freshman class. Initially, the program was designed to include only three non-credit bearing courses, English, Math, and Reading/Study Skills. Upon successful completion of their coursework, the students were admitted to the college for the Fall semester.

In 1976, the program was changed with the addition of a fourth course, Western Civilization, which was offered for credit basis. This change was a result of extensive review by the Dean at the time and the Pre-College Faculty, who believed that the three course program did not mirror the academic reality of the CBS freshmen year. The Reading/Study Skills component of PCSI served as a buffer for Western Civilization. In this course, students were taught learning strategies in the areas of listening, notetaking, reading and test-taking. Each of these modules were designed to aid the student in his/her study of Western Civilization.

During the summers of 1986 and 1987, college credit was given for successful completion of the Reading/Study Skills course. By providing credit for this course, the students completed one semester of this two semester course and with the completion of the subsequent course in the Fall semester and an eventual reduced course load. However, there were problems that arose with the addition of this credit bearing course. One was the reduced class enrollments during the regular academic year. The other was that, there was a greater emphasis on skills and less on coping strategies which these students needed.

In response to the problems that were observed, the Reading and Academic Development department introduced the College Learning Strategies course (RDB 190). This course was designed to diversify

the program and departmental offerings and to provide the students with the appropriate coping strategies to achieve academic success and to improve study and time management skills.

STUDENT PROFILE:

The students selected to be enrolled in the PCSI program have a specific profile. Their SAT scores range from 230 to 510 on the Verbal section and 280-590 on the Math section. They have ranked in the lower half to upper third of their graduating class.

For the most part, this student is from the upper middle class. However, in summer, 1990, as part of the University's move to diversify the student body as well as provide academic services for the inner-city students of Hartford, there had been a change in the student body with a small percentage of minority students present in the classes. These students tend to demonstrate academic deficiencies for reasons often different from the rest of the student population.

Most of the students have particular problems with motivation, focusing on goals, attendance, time management, and commitment to task. Over the years, more students have been identified as "Learning Disabled", and have demonstrated problems associated with this. These include problems with timed tests, organization, and reading comprehension.

RESEARCH:

Research continues to indicate that there is a need for the more academically prepared college student. Increasingly, students are entering colleges unprepared for the academic challenges they will encounter as college students. With the change in student population from academically skilled, to those with more diverse academic needs and deficits due to changes in socioeconomic backgrounds, educational preparation, and reasons for enrolling in college; colleges need to offer programs that will meet these students needs as well, as observed by Virginia N. Gordon of Ohio State University and Thomas J. Grites of Stockton State.

There is a need for the development of course such as ours to provide these students with a means to achieve the most from their college experiences. Such courses will help them to make the transition from high school to college. Furthermore, these students also need to enroll in courses that will provide them with skills in the areas of thinking, reading, and reasoning. According to Margaret Anne Langer and Judith C. Neal in The Journal of Reading, November 1987 issue, "Teaching study skills adjunct to content courses appears to promote academic success of high risk students and holds promise for empowering students as active learners." In addition, these courses should provide support and structure for the student as they become more independent and mature learners. As Gordon and Grites further point out in their article "The Freshman Seminar Course: Helping Students Succeed": They [the students] are involved in developmental tasks such as becoming independent, developing physical and intellectual competence, and developing interpersonal skills." A.W. Chickering in his article "The Modern American College' also supports this premise.

College Learning Strategies and similar courses offered throughout the country by other universities such as George Washington, Syracuse, Reed, and Northwestern to name but a few, provide a needed service for incoming freshman who are at-risk. As Gordon and Frites further point out "The need for this type of course was demonstrated at the National Conferences on Freshman Orientation/Seminar course concept at the University of South Carolina in 1982, 83, and '84." Courses such as ours enable a student to feel more "comfortable and accepted in an environment they may perceive as strange and threatening" (Gordon and Grites). Through the various classroom approaches and materials, students are able to identify and understand the environment in which they will be living and learning for the next fours years.

Finally, such programs will increase student retention. With faculty support, skills acquisition, and content information, these students should develop a feeling of security, independence, and competency needed to insure success as they pursue their college education.

CURRICULUM:

The classes consisted of 10 students per section and met daily for 1 hour 15 minutes for 5 weeks. A variety of instructional approaches

were used including lectures, textbook readings, small group assignments, lab applications, journals, site visits, projects, and exams. A distinguishing feature of the course is the opportunity for students to apply the strategies taught to other college work, both in the classroom and the reading lab. Upon successful completion of the course, students received a letter grade and 1 credit which was applicable towards completion of their degree.

JOURNAL ASSIGNMENTS:

Research shows that developmental students frequently have trouble expressing themselves in writing. A journal requirement was added to the pre-college program. Some of the benefits beside improving writing and thinking skill appeared to be a better perception of self and a clearer understanding of concepts that were being taught.

STATISTICS:

As verbal and math SAT scores decline, it appears to indicate that the level of preparation of freshmen students is also declining. Since this paper looks at at risk freshmen who participated in a college preparation program, some of the results give insight into student selection criteria and course components to justify such courses.

Figure 1: Number of Students in the Program

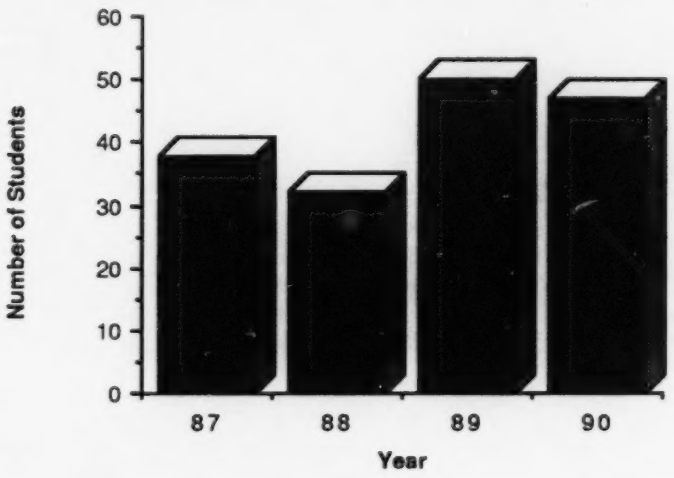

Table I: QPA Based on 4 Earned Credit
(Grading 0.00 to 4.00)

	1987	1988	1989	1990
Maximum	2.95	3.19	3.09	3.91
Median	2.19	2.22	2.00	1.80
Minimum	1.33	1.72	1.15	.6

The class of 1990 (49 students presently are freshmen) had the lowest SAT scores even seen for a pre-college class.

In addition, the students were asked to evaluate the program as the last class. In 1989 and 1990, 95 percent of the students in both classes considered the course to be important and significant in providing basic skill development. This is an interesting result because grades for many of the students enrolled in RDB 190 did not reflect this attitude. However the improved grade in the Western Civilization course did indicate a positive transfer of skills, which supports the philosophy of the Learning Strategies course. Furthermore, based on the evaluation and responses subsequent student discussions there is continued evidence that courses such as these are necessary and beneficial.

CONCERNS:

During the time that RDB 190 has been included in PCSI, a number of issues have arisen.

One of the major concerns was the lack of available statistics and information about the preceding classes enrolled in PCSI. Another problem is that there had been little follow-up on these students after they have been enrolled in the college in the Fall. Some information is kept on their academic status for their Freshmen year such as G.P.A, academic status (probation, dismissal, Dean's List), but this information is often not shared with PCSI faculty. Very little information is kept on the status of these students during their Sophomore years and later as they matriculate and transfer to other colleges both within the University of Hartford or elsewhere.

The director has had little or no control over the admission of students into PCSI. This has been a particular problem as there is little information on grades, academic and social problems, weaknesses and strengths etc. With control, a more academically at-risk student could be enrolled, as well as those who demonstrate ability and potential, but do not have the motivation.

Another problem is the scheduling of classes. All students were enrolled in classes from 8:30-4:00 for five days for five weeks. Class size was limited to 10-12 maximum, but the groups were kept static from class to class. This type of grouping encouraged negative dynamics to occur. For example, certain behaviors became the norm, emphasis on studying for a particular course was consistent among the members of the entire class, sharing of papers and assignments occurred, and answers for exams also were shared. A "high-school" feeling was perceived by the students, who saw the grouping as tracking and non-collegiate treatment of them.

FUTURE:

It appears that some of these concerns may be addressed in the future. PCSI is undergoing some radical changes in admissions, scheduling, and course offerings. Although some control will still be in the hands of the director, a group has begun meeting this fall to bring about some changes. These include: a three day week schedule, classes of one-hour fifteen minutes, supervised labs for the students to apply skills to content area materials, more diverse offerings in Math, staffing, testing-out options, and greater faculty input into programming. Some areas remains uncertain such as Admissions, statistics, and student population. The planning group will continue to meet in the Spring to address these and other issues. Thus, RDB 190 may also need to reexamine its curriculum to meet the changes of the future. However, its goals of providing the student with strategies to achieve success in college will never change.

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